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**THE FLEXIBLE ORGANIZATION DESIGN:
ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS**

Chris Du Boulay

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**THE FLEXIBLE ORGANIZATION DESIGN : ADVANTAGES AND
PITFALLS**

CHRIS DU BOULAY

PREFACE

Organization design, mission statements and management strategy are not often given the emphasis they deserve within the human service sector. These issues are given a great deal of emphasis within the mainstream commercial sector.

In the minds of many human service boards of management these issues are seen as secondary, behind the primary aim of assisting clients. While this priority is commendable, the secondary issues are rarely addressed sufficiently. The result is that the organization loses direction and fails to remain abreast of the changing demands of the client population.

While I would not suggest that this is intentional, there are many examples of human service organizations that have failed to address these important management issues, and have consequently failed to meet the growing demand for their services. In some instances poor management has lead to the collapse of human service organizations and wide ranging prosecution.

The particular application of this paper is the need for human service agencies to examine their own organization design and structure with the view to achieving greater flexibility. There are trends within large national and international companies to the move towards flexible organization design. This development also has implications for permanent, full-time employment within the human service sector.

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THE FLEXIBLE ORGANIZATION DESIGN :ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS**ABSTRACT**

The traditional model of organizational design is being gradually eroded. Flexibility is not only viewed as necessary, but largely inevitable. The methods or strategies employed by organizations to implement these necessary changes, represents the only choice available to employers.

This paper examines two major strategies employed to achieve labour flexibility, thus gaining flexibility in the design of the organization. These strategies are numerical flexibility and functional flexibility. The implications of these strategies, both positive and negative, are discussed. These strategies are viewed differently by employers and employees.

INTRODUCTION

Firms do not make decisions regarding their organizational design to enhance the work conditions of their employees. Such decisions are made in the interest of the firm's productivity, which is becoming increasingly important in view of its need to be competitive. However, resultant changes to organization design do have some advantages for employees.

A recent trend indicates that firms are opting for a stable core of attached employees augmented by many contract and peripheral workers (Pfeffer and Baron, 1988; Edwards, 1979). History shows that this is not a new arrangement, for prior to the Industrial Revolution the cottage industry thrived. Goods and component parts were made in people's homes, then were sold to and collected by journeymen. A variation of this arrangement is emerging for the peripheral workers. Those in small firms are likely to make and sell component parts to large firms.

This paper will outline major strategies of functional and numerical flexibility. The implications for organizations and employees, in terms of the advantages and pitfalls of flexible organization design, will also be examined.

STRATEGIES FOR FLEXIBLE ORGANIZATION DESIGN

There are two main areas of labour flexibility which concern any organization, they are numerical and functional flexibility. There is increasing pressure in the present economic climate for organizations to become more flexible and responsive to the rapid changes that are taking place, particularly with the increasing use of advanced technology. The consequence of inflexibility is often inefficiency, lower productivity, lower profitability and bankruptcy. This is the driving force of change.

Numerical flexibility refers to the practice of firms changing the number of workers in their employ to suit the fluctuations of demand or externalizing part of the workforce. There are times when firms utilize the capacity of their workers and other times when they only utilize part of that capacity. However, even when the employees are not working to capacity, they still receive the same income and benefits. It is this situation that firms examine in terms of lost productivity.

An increasingly popular solution to this problem is to keep a smaller core workforce who will be fully utilized even in the lean times, and employ the other workers on a contractual or piece-meal basis (Mueller, 1990; McCune, Beatty and Montagno, 1989). This practice is referred to as externalizing the workforce or as

Pfeffer and Baron (1988) term it 'taking the workers back out'. The contract and peripheral workforce is regarded as a 'buffer' to protect the stability and security of the core or permanent workforce. The 'buffer' workforce provides the firm with flexibility without the pain and cost of retrenching permanent employees. This shift in human resource deployment is matched by the rapid growth in firms providing temporary workers for a variety of skill and knowledge areas.

Another aspect of externalization is to sub-contract parts of the production process to other firms. These other firms may have become specialists in these areas, and are consequently more efficient. This may actually reduce the component cost for the larger firm (Gustavsen, 1986). Firms are able to deal with "...market uncertainties and rapidly changing skill requirements in the market place without incurring long-term costs." (Mueller, 1990).

Functional flexibility refers to internal market strategies that have been generated to deal with the current level of staffing. These strategies do not require the reduction of employees; they involve making the existing employees more skilled and more flexible. This type of flexibility is largely translated into skill acquisition, job redesign and flexible work schedules.

Skill acquisition programmes are largely referred to as multi-skilling in Australia. This involves increasing the workers' skill repertoire (Cordery, 1989) and thereby enabling a more complete use of the existing workforce. In practice, this usually leads to job redesign and sometimes to self-regulating work groups.

The multi-skilling programmes in Australia include a number of features. Firstly, the number of particular job titles used by the firm are reduced and a few 'broad - banded', more general job classifications are used. Secondly, training programmes have been provided for workers to increase their range of skills. Thirdly, employers have developed systems of job rotation, in order to provide an opportunity for the use of newly acquired skills. Fourthly, the reward system has been designed around the acquisition of additional skills, thereby encouraging the employees to participate. Finally, there has been some reluctant co-operation primarily from craft unions (Gustavsen, 1986), which are ready to point out the erosion of their respective positions. The main driving force behind the acceptance of such radical innovations has been the need to increase productivity in order to remain competitive, both nationally and internationally (Cordery, 1989). This involves coping with advanced technology, which demands flexibility.

Flexible work schedules involve innovations in the way employees meet their work commitment to the firm.

These innovations include, flexi-time, extended schedules, rostering systems, job sharing and teleworking. This flexibility is used by organizations in order to employ their existing workforce more productively. The need for reducing the size of the workforce is averted by imaginative innovations in work schedules. By using these innovations, organizations do not lose valuable employees nor do they need to initiate recruits.

IMPLICATIONS : ADVANTAGES AND PITFALLS

The implications of both numerical and functional flexibility will be dealt with from both the organizations' and employees' perspective.

Numerical Flexibility

Externalizing part of an organization's workforce has a number of advantages and pitfalls for both the organization and the employee. As the decision is largely made by the management, one can assume that most of the advantages will be in the organizations' favour, while most of the pitfalls will be most relevant to the employees.

The prime advantage for organizations is the cost reduction capacity of maintaining only a small core of permanent employees. The cost of employing a large permanent workforce is high, as costs such as superannuation, health plans and insurance have to be paid even if the company is struggling (Pfeffer and Baron, 1988). The cost is also high in terms of redundancy payouts for retrenched workers. If the firm can reduce its total permanent workforce, it will make substantial savings. Part of the payroll becomes a variable cost, rather than a fixed cost.

This not only reduces a firm's fixed costs, but also enables them to be much more responsive to fluctuations in demand. This is achieved by the use of temporary or peripheral workers and by sub-contracting particular jobs or distributing excess work. There is no obligation (legal or social) to retain the increased workforce as the demand subsides. They are employed when work is available or on a contractual basis. The use of contract and temporary workers increases the mix of skills available to the organization.

Firms do not have to supply the whole range of component parts necessary for their production process. They need not strive for self reliance. They have the opportunity to specialize or to focus on their distinctive competence. This means they can take advantage of economies of scale and thereby become more competitive.

Another advantage for organizations is that it can stabilize and provide security for its core workforce. In turn, the firm receives loyalty and stable output from the core workers. The contract and peripheral workers often carry out tasks that are considered less desirable, thus providing a further concession to the core workers.

Unions are gradually losing influence over the contract and peripheral workforce. As organizations become more flexible by freeing up vertical and horizontal boundaries, the traditional skill or craft unions are faced with blurry demarcations (Pfeffer and Baron, 1988). Some employers welcome this development as they believe it will lead to less time lost in demarcation disputes. However, this has not been the case. The number of disputes has decreased, but their duration has increased and intensified. The union movement may be accepting the 'new reality' of organizational flexibility though (Mueller, 1990).

Frank (1984) states that employees are very conscious of perceived wage inequities within an organization. Externalization provides employers with the opportunity to reduce the pressure to equalize wages. They may choose to externalize the lower paid jobs or the higher paid jobs to avoid the pressure to upgrade the existing wage system.

From the employees perspective, there are some advantages of externalization. The obvious one is for the increasingly few core employees. They have increased job stability and security. Another advantage exists for those workers who welcome the opportunity to work from home. The main group advantaged here are those who work with computers. This activity lends itself to work at home being linked to the workplace. Homebased work carries with it benefits such as lower commuting costs, being able to work in one's own familiar environment and averting the need for parents to use child care.

There are a number of pitfalls related to numerical flexibility. The major one for workers is the lack of job security, unless they are part of the fortunate core workforce. They can expect employment of less duration, such as short, fixed term contracts. These contracts are likely to be punctuated by periods of unemployment or part-time work. There are fewer opportunities for non-core workers to pursue a career and gain promotion within an organization (Granovetter, 1984). They miss the stable social interaction with colleagues and the support networks that are constructed. They will lose benefits such as superannuation, health plans and insurance.

Reibstein (1986) mentions that non-core employees lack corporate commitment. The organization does not display any commitment to them, so they feel no need to give anything extra. They do their job and leave. There is no incentive to 'go the extra mile'.

Another pitfall for the organization is the loss of control over the non-core employees and over the quality of work they produce. Sub-contracting work creates co-ordination difficulties. In pushing for externalization, firms become more dependent on outside workers and suppliers. There is an increased chance for disruption and delay. They have created a difficult task of control and co-ordination of both workers and supplies (Pfeffer and Baron, 1988).

Functional Flexibility

If workers are given the opportunity to increase their skill repertoire and to be creative in terms of work schedules, then organizations have few limits on the flexibility of their design. Gustavsen (1986) believes that this innovation will lead to organizational reform, with greater employee participation in decision making. Sparrow and Pettigrew (1988) suggest that 'flatter, leaner' organizational structures will result, which are more responsive to market fluctuations.

Functional flexibility is advantageous because it provides workers with the opportunity to learn new skills and enables the firm to utilise them more efficiently. If the workers are equipped with a greater range of skills, then they can be used to respond quickly to market fluctuations. There is less machine 'down time', because the workers have gained maintenance skills as well as operation skills. They do not have to wait for the maintenance team to arrive. Multi-skilled workers can handle small maintenance problems more efficiently than maintenance teams because they are on the scene. They also have a detailed knowledge of the production process which should be utilized to promote innovation (Piore and Sabel, 1984). This is beneficial for the firm because a smaller workforce can deal with a greater variety of tasks.

A multi-skilled workforce can be formed into small self-regulating groups which require less supervision and control, and provide more autonomy and responsibility for the workers. Mintzberg's (1983) 'clothes hanger' model of a flexible, responsive organization suggests the reduction of middle management and more responsibility given to the workers. This is advantageous for the workers because they can be involved in the decision making process (Little, 1988). Gustavsen (1986) believes that production workers need to be active in the process of change and that there is a permanent need for innovation. This enriches their jobs and leads to a more humane and democratic organization.

Employees claim that multi-skilling provides them with an opportunity to reduce the control of unions, particularly craft unions. The basis for this claim is provided by the flexibility provided for workers to gain

a repertoire of skills across the traditional craft boundaries. This produces blurred boundaries and potential demarcation implications. The unions actually claim that employers are pursuing this type of functional flexibility for the purpose of reducing union control (Mueller 1990).

There are also costs associated with functional flexibility. The first one affects the organization directly and the employees indirectly. In the flexible organization, first line supervisors and middle management feel threatened because the multi-skilled workforce encroaches on their traditional roles. Less supervision is necessary when employees are given autonomy and responsibility. As a result of this feeling that their jobs are under threat, supervisors and middle managers make the actual implementation of the flexible systems difficult (Oldham and Hackman, 1980; Hofstede, 1984).

Some organizations have designed elaborate skill acquisition programmes, but have been unable to provide sufficient opportunities for the workers to use their new skills. This causes frustration for the workers and a sense of futility. Similarly, if there is no monetary reward for additional qualifications, the system will fail. In order to encourage the workers to value the skill acquisition procedure, employers need to attach value to it. The usual method is to provide incremental increases in wages.

A final cost of training and retraining programmes is that they are costly in terms of payment to instructors and lost work time. Organizations have enough evidence to convince them that this is only a short term cost; in the long term training is an asset. However, if they provide extensive training and equip their employees with a variety of skills, some employees may leave for better jobs.

CONCLUSION

Organizations are under pressure to develop flexible strategies in order to cope with competition, demands for increased productivity and advanced technology. For many organizations this need for flexibility is an imposition, which requires major rethinking and restructuring. They are faced with many options and strategies, the difficulty lies in choosing those suitable for their situation.

They need to decide whether to strive for numerical or functional flexibility. They need to decide whether to gain a flexible range of skills by externalization then sub-contracting, or whether to equip their existing workforce with a flexible range of skills. They will need to weigh up the cost and benefits of each approach for their particular situation.

The firms are also under pressure to become flexible in terms of freeing up traditional occupational boundaries and providing employees with greater responsibility and autonomy. This pressure does not only come from the employees but also from the Federal Government. The basis for this push for broad banding and increased autonomy is not just to humanize the workplace, but to keep abreast of advanced technology and competitors.

Those organizations which have adopted strategies to ensure a flexible design, are emerging as the most successful ones. They recognize the need for permanent innovation and flexibility in order to remain responsive to developments in new technology and market fluctuations.

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